

# Healing

through

Insight Meditation

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Association for Insight Meditation

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Sister Hla Myint at  
Paṇḍitārāma, Rangoon 1991

# Healing Through Insight Meditation

This is the story of a Burmese meditator, and of how she used insight meditation to cure a tumour in her throat. At that time she was the sister-in-charge of the cardiac unit in the General Hospital in Rangoon. The doctor suspected the growth to be cancerous and wanted to do a biopsy. Sister Hla Myint, then aged 37 and although herself a nurse, refused all further medical examination or treatment, and took leave to practise intensive insight meditation.

For her it was a simple decision. She thought that if the tumour was malignant, a biopsy might further stimulate its growth. She herself believed it to be malignant, and if this was confirmed she would not want to undergo medical treatment. Why not? "There is no guarantee of a cure," she said. "Even after an operation or radiation treatment, the cancer may spread again. The side-effects can be worse than the cure. I didn't want to go through the agony I have seen other patients endure. I want to keep my mind intact, fully mindful and alert. I do not want any drugs to obscure the clarity of my mind. The way I regard it is simple. If I undergo treatment, I may or may not be cured, but I will definitely have to put up with serious side-effects. If I meditate, I may or may not be cured, but the side-effect is nibbāna — the cessation of all suffering. If I don't attain nibbāna, I will at least get nearer to it. Besides, I have absolute faith in insight meditation."

So began a long battle with the tumour. Although the growth subsided after an initial short retreat, it was to re-emerge some years later. For the latter part, she meditated intensively for nearly three years before the tumour completely disappeared. This is the story of her faith, perseverance, determination and effort.

However, before I start from the very beginning, I should perhaps explain how I got to know Sister Hla Myint. I first met her in June 1987 when I attended the Mahāsī Yeikthā Meditation Centre in Rangoon. She was tall, of a dark complexion and strong. I was at the meditation centre until October 1988. She was also staying there, attending to the medical needs of monks, nuns and meditators. She had been staying and serving at the centre since her tumour was cured in May 1982, always on call to dispense medicine or to treat minor ailments.

I did not learn her story until my second trip to Burma in July 1989. That was when I fell ill towards the end of my stay in early 1991. I had moved from Mahāsī Yeikthā to follow my teacher, Sayādaw U Paṇḍita, to Paṇḍitārāma, a new meditation centre. Sister Hla Myint also came along to stay and serve at the new centre.

My health deteriorated in January 1991 and for several months I did not feel well. I had a persistent cough, and there were aches and pains in my bones and joints. Sister Hla Myint took me to the General Hospital to have X-rays taken and to consult several specialists. She seemed to have many helpful friends — nurses and doctors — at the hospital. I did not need to wait long for examination and treatment.

Back at the meditation centre, she was tireless and would check on me several times a day. She cooked chicken soup to help me regain strength. I was not a very good patient because I disliked taking medicines. One day, the orthopaedic surgeon prescribed some drugs for my aches. He suspected I was suffering from some kind of arthritis. I was disinclined to take the medicine because I was told it had some side-effects. So I asked her, “Sister, tell me, if you were in my position, would you take this medicine?” She replied “No,” and then confessed that although she was a nurse and often dispensed medicines to others, she rarely took any herself. If she was sick, she would meditate. She didn’t like the side-effects of medicines and had strong faith in meditation. “Even if I don’t get well and should die, if I meditate I can attain nibbāna,” she remarked. So whenever she was sick, she would drink lots of fluids and meditate the whole day long. (Of course, we are not asking meditators to refuse medicine if they are ill. They have to exercise their discretion. Not everybody can be like Sister Hla Myint. Besides, one has to be in intensive meditation and use concentration to overcome an ailment. It may not be easy for all meditators to persevere in practice and to get powerful concentration. So it would be prudent for them to take medicines.)

Sister Hla Myint then told me about her own struggle with a tumour, which she believed to be malignant. Later, when I got better, I interviewed her to get the whole story, which I present here.

Sister Hla Myint was born on 22nd September, 1936. She became a nurse at the age of 21. In 1967 she was sent to Germany where she underwent a one and a half year course in cardiology. On her return,

she was appointed the sister-in-charge of the cardiac unit at Rangoon General Hospital.

Her first experience with intensive insight meditation was in May 1970 when she was 34. She then had some personal problems and was feeling depressed. She went to the Mahāsī Yeikthā and meditated for 50 days. After that, she said, she felt very much better. She did not feel troubled about the problem any more. Ever since then, she had firm faith in meditation. Whenever she had leave, she would go to the Mahāsī Centre at Moulmein and practise with Sayādaw U Paṇḍita who was then in charge of that centre.

In 1973, she felt a growth in her throat. She could feel it when she swallowed. The doctor examined her throat with an oesophagus scope. It was a painful 20-minute examination as the scope had to be inserted inside her throat. They saw a growth, about the size of a tamarind seed. They gave her antibiotics and anti-inflammatory drugs, but after ten days, they found that the growth, instead of subsiding, had grown even bigger. They wanted to do a biopsy to confirm whether it was malignant or not. She did not want to undergo the biopsy and instead took two months' leave and went off to a meditation centre in a rural area to meditate. She had heard about various cures, even of cancer, through insight meditation, and she was confident that meditation could cure her disease too. (For records of various kinds of cures through insight meditation, please refer to the book "Dhamma Therapy" written by Mahāsī Sayādaw and translated by Bhikkhu Aggacitta. There, it is said that when the mind has attained a certain level of concentration, the blood becomes purified and after a consistent period of practice, cures of diseases can take place.)

During her two months of practice, she noted many painful sensations. She felt very hot sensations coming out from her mouth. The sensations eventually disappeared and she felt comfortable. At the end of the two months she felt that the growth in her throat had become very small. It no longer irritated her, so she returned to work.

However, the tumour emerged again some six years later in 1979, this time protruding outward so that a prominent lump of about one inch in diameter could be seen on her throat. Sister Hla Myint again resorted to meditation.

Before I describe her second and longer battle with the tumour, let me record here another ailment she suffered from in 1976 and cured through meditation. It was a severe backache. She had X-rays taken of her back, but they did not show up anything wrong. The doctors suspected that the pain could be originating from the kidneys and wanted to do an injection kidney X-ray. Sister Hla Myint declined further investigation. She decided to meditate. She could not take leave from her work then. So every day after work she would meditate for four hours from 5.00 p.m. to 9.00 p.m. at the Mahāsī Yeikthā. Although her back ached throughout the day, she did not take any painkillers, even when the pain became acute.

She practised for about one month, going daily to the meditation centre after work. Then one night after returning home, she went to the toilet to urinate. As she tried to urinate, she felt an acute pain. After several minutes, a calcium-white milky fluid came out. Simultaneously with the discharge, her backache disappeared. She believed that the pain had come from her kidneys and that she was cured through meditation.

In mid 1979, she was planning to resign her job to work abroad when her tumour started growing again. "I had wanted to work abroad so that I could send money back to support a meditation centre," she said. However, the re-emergence of the tumour put paid to her plans. Instead she resigned and went into intensive meditation. From then on, for nearly three years, apart from a few brief intervals, she meditated intensively — practising sitting and walking meditation and maintaining mindfulness the whole day and night. She did most of her practice in Mahāsī Yeikthā. From time to time, she travelled to remote areas, spending a total of about 12 months away from the centre.

At one village in Moulmein district, she practised for about a month, doing six hours of continuous standing meditation daily. For about a month at another centre in Pegu, she took one meal a day and did walking meditation daily for six hours at a stretch from 11.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. Sometimes she felt very light, as if she was walking on clouds, while at other times there was a lot of pain.

Initially, the tumour continued to grow until it reached the size of a betel nut. It was hard and round. Her hearing was affected so that she had to start using a hearing aid. While she was practising



at Mahāsī Yeikthā, some friends who were doctors would urge her to go to the hospital to have the growth removed. “They warned me that my tumour was growing bigger,” she said. Sometimes people would touch the hard lump on her throat and comment on how big it was.

She experienced a lot of pain during her practice, but never gave up. She was determined to practise until her tumour subsided. During meditation she sometimes felt the tumour throbbing with pain. The pain would move down to her chest. She felt nauseous and vomited. Sometimes the pain would begin from the top of her head. It would shift to her forehead, ears, jaw and down to her tumour where it would disappear. At other times the pain started from her shoulder blades and moved to the head, ear and down to her tumour. She noted all the pain as calmly as she could. It could be a very sharp pain, but she could note and tolerate the sensations.

She reported her experiences to Mahāsī Sayādaw who encouraged her to carry on practising. “The Sayādaw told me not to relax but to keep on trying. He urged me to be patient and assured me that I would get better,” she said. (When Mahāsī Sayādaw passed away in August 1982, Sister Hla Myint had already been cured of her tumour for about three months.)

In April 1981, she went to Taung Song, a small village near Thaton in Lower Burma, to continue her practice. The abbot of a monastery gave her a hut in an isolated and distant area. Apart from a nun who stayed a short distance away in another hut, she was alone. “There was no electricity and at first I felt quite frightened,” she recalled, “but later I began to enjoy the solitude. One night I sat for seven hours from 7.00 p.m. to 2.00 a.m. When I opened my eyes, the room was all bright. I thought it was sunrise, but when I went to the window, I found it was still dark outside.”

She had several other interesting experiences at Taung Song. One night she saw a giant-like figure outside her hut while doing her walking meditation. She was going to approach the figure when it disappeared. She believed it was not just a vision but a deity (deva).

Once, for several days, she had recurrent thoughts that some people were coming from Rangoon to look for her. She reported the matter to the abbot who told her to dismiss the thoughts and to continue practice. One and a half months later, while she was

meditating in her hut, she heard a knock on the door. When she opened it, she found a group of people. They were government officials who said that had been searching all over for her. She was wanted in Rangoon on some official matter. Sister Hla Myint followed them to Rangoon and returned after ten days to Taung Song. Altogether she spent about six months at Taung Song before returning to Mahāsī Yeikthā in October 1981.

Resuming her practice at Mahāsī Yeikthā, she meditated intensively for about seven months. This time the pain was less intense and she found the practice quite smooth. She continued to report her experiences to Mahāsī Sayādaw who encouraged her to carry on noting. The tumour began to shrink little by little during this seven-month period. She noticed that it was gradually becoming smaller and by 1st May, 1982, she found that it was completely gone. There was no trace of any lump or hardness in her throat. She was completely cured.

Strangely, she did not feel exceptionally happy, even though her objective had been reached after nearly three years of arduous practice. Towards the end of the practice her mind had become quite equanimous so that she was not very much concerned about the tumour any more. Unpleasant sensations did not bother her either as she could observe them as merely sensations.

When she reported to Mahāsī Sayādaw about the disappearance of her tumour, he commented that it was because of her good practice. He remarked that she had great energy in meditation. She told Mahāsī Sayādaw that she would spend her life from now on in the service of the Buddha's teaching. He advised that when she came out of intensive practice, she should continue to find time for meditation.

During her practice, her faculties were sharp. Whenever she got up from sitting she could hear quite well without any hearing aid. However, after stopping intensive practice, her hearing defect returned and she had to use her hearing aid.

After her cure in May 1982, she emerged from intensive practice, but remained at the Mahāsī Yeikthā to serve as a nurse to monks, nuns, and meditators. Since 1980, she has been observing eight precepts, which include abstaining from food after midday. In November 1990 when Sayādaw U Paṇḍitabhivamsa moved to

Paṇḍitārāma, a new meditation centre, she followed to offer her services to meditators there.

Sister Hla Myint has dedicated her life to the service of the Buddha's teaching. Since she has been trained as a nurse, she is helping by offering her medical services. She also has a great desire to promote and spread the Dhamma, especially insight meditation. Wherever she goes, she encourages people to meditate and to attend the meditation centre for retreats. One day she hopes to organise retreats in small villages throughout Burma. Some villages have no meditation teacher so she hopes to arrange for meditation teachers to conduct retreats in such villages.

"I think every meditator should try to be at least a sotāpanna," she said. If one attains to that level during practice, one has seen nibbāna and will be certain to have no more than seven rebirths. Not taking rebirth means permanent freedom from suffering. Being born means that one has to grow old and die; and to live, one has to struggle to keep the mind and body going. So, one must bear the burden of physical pain and mental suffering.

Only through the practice of insight meditation can one develop an equanimous mind, which is less affected by the ups and downs of life. If one becomes an arahant, one will be totally unaffected by the vicissitudes of life. One may have physical suffering, but one will be unaffected mentally, since the mind remains calm and peaceful.

The aim of insight meditation is not, of course, to cure bodily diseases, but to cure the mental disease of greed, hatred, and delusion. Once these defilements are eradicated, the mind will become pure and peaceful. That will be our last life, and there will not be any further rebirth. So, suffering in the cycle of birth and death will come to an end.

When concentration has been sustained for a considerable period, some meditators experience cures of diseases. Some patients suffering from critical or chronic illnesses resorted to insight meditation and got cured. If a disease is severe and the side-effects of drugs are odious, people with strong faith in meditation may be prepared to meditate unto death. They might recover miraculously or they might die. However, a person with strong faith knows that to die while meditating is the best way to go. One who is mindful and has a wholesome mind at the moment of death is assured of a good rebirth.

Meditation develops wisdom, which will shorten the cycle of rebirth and hasten the attainment of nibbāna. Looking at it in this way, one finds that one has nothing to lose and everything to gain by meditating strenuously.

Furthermore, diseases are sometimes mind related, i.e. one may become sick due to stress or depression. Since meditation corrects the mental imbalance, any psychosomatic disorder will also be cured.

After considering these various benefits, especially the remarkable cures enjoyed by Sister Hla Myint, we hope that readers will be inspired to take up insight meditation. As for practising meditators, we hope they will find even more zest and enthusiasm in their practice. Nevertheless, we should stress again that the aim of meditation is to eradicate suffering by attaining nibbāna. The curing of diseases, should it take place, is a secondary result.

May all beings be well and happy. May they discover the way leading to the end of suffering.